Callings – Invitations to Transform

Beloved community: I invite you to join me in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we offer thanks for the freedom to gather today on our live stream and in this space on Wahpekute Dakota land that has been loved for millennia. **Holy spirit, we trust your presence with us now as we wonder about how you are calling to each of us – inviting us to transform.** We pray as disciples of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

To transform is to undergo a significant change in character or condition. As we each look inward this morning to look and listen for where God might be calling us to transform for the better, we can experience God as the fathomlessly powerful loving energy that makes transformation possible.

We've just heard the story of Saul, a prominent religious leader within the first century Jewish community. Based on having been raised in the city of Tarsus, he actually held dual citizenship in Israel and Rome. As Sharri articulated when introducing the reading, Saul oversaw the persecution of followers of "The Way" – that is, followers of the rogue sect within the Jewish community who were zealously devoted to carrying forward Jesus' unique teachings after his execution as a political dissident who spoke out against the Roman empire's oppressive ways.

One could say that Saul was very much "doing his thing." What do I mean when I say Saul was "doing his thing?" I mean that he committed tremendous energy to it, he was competent and familiar with the work, and people recognized him in the role of providing religious oversight. I invite you to hear those qualifiers again, with an ear for how they are more neutral than they are positive or negative.

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If Professor Bob Albers with whom I studied pastoral care during my seminary years had been present as a mentor or companion to Saul, I know that Bob would have asked him, "Saul, how is that working for you?"

I invite you to wonder with me this morning: Where in your life might you seem to be gliding along in a groove but you are actually on autopilot – looking either straight ahead or down at your feet as you move along a track (to which you seem attached), without much likelihood of deviating from the course and without seeing the landscape around you? What if you could feel less stuck on a rollercoaster and more like a sailboat on water?

Fruitful follow-up questions for Saul and each of us might be these:

I see you commit tremendous energy to that endeavor. **Are you also energized by that work?**

I see that you are competent and familiar with your work. **Do you also find purpose, meaning, and fulfillment in that work?**

I see that people recognize you in the role of providing religious oversight (or another role). **Are you bringing your best skills and energy and meeting a need or opportunity within your community?**

A more all-encompassing question might be this: **Do you feel God (that fathomlessly powerful loving energy) at work through you** in this thing to which you are devoting your energy, leaning on competence and familiarity, and meeting status quo expectations that others have of you?

Notice the question Saul most needed to hear: *"Why?"* He heard a voice asking, *"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

Saul may have known and recited a "why" that felt valid to him. He was attempting to silence a movement that was gaining attention and bringing down upon his community the wrath of the empire.

He was serving the cause of self-preservation. I imagine he justified the violence he condoned (and sometimes perpetrated) as a means to keep order such that the authoritarian regime did not unleash more violence on the people in greater magnitude. Such a messy "why" could not have felt very clear or empowering in a good, godly (as in powerfully loving) way for Saul.

Is there a space in your life – an endeavor or the dynamics within a relationships – where, call it a groove or call it a run (maybe call it a lane), these things are true?

- You feel as though you are expending a lot of energy but are not being re-energized by the effort.
- You are competent and familiar with your tasks and lane but you are not experiencing much meaning, purpose or fulfillment.
- You receive recognition from others for the skill and energy you contribute, but you don't sense that the space you are filling is really a good fit that engages your skills and energy?

Why? Why are you doing that thing?

How is it working for you?

Do you feel God at work through you?

When my gut intuition or my emotional center sends me a niggling sensation that something isn't right and that I might need to give serious consideration to making a change, here is another question I ask myself: **Is this rut or lane I'm in more life-giving and life-affirming or more life-siphoning and life-defeating?**

I moved into a groove, a rut, a lane around age 10 or 12 that I didn't exit until (but thank God that I did) around age 21.

It started as competence and ended as busyness. As a ten year old grade school student, academics came easily. What did that look like? It looked like scoring good grades – checkmark in the box. Then I entered adolescence. I could pursue athletics. I was good enough but didn't enjoy them much. Check. I played piano a lot. I couldn't stand playing classical music but kept play it because I could compete in Solo and Ensemble competitions. Check. My goodness. I kept going with those sports I didn't particularly care for. And we need a captain, so I guess I'll be a captain. Check. Do, do, do, do, die. I remember that I joined the yearbook staff specifically so that I could be an editor and get to write all the tiny little accolades under the senior photos, hoping that I would amass the most little things done under my senior photo. I think I accomplished it (check!) without much life in my tank when I was done with that.

It took being blinded by the light. It took being brought down to my knees in the office of one of the education professors at Beloit College – dear, dear Kathy who continues to watch the health and wellbeing of my children 25 years later. She said, "Clare, you want to me passionate about everything you do. And that might work for the 5K, but it will never work for the marathon." And she helped me see in that blinding light that I was in a rut of busyness – expending my energy, meeting status quo expectations in ways that were not meaningful and not giving me life or affirming life within me.

Hear again our opening words from a neighbor shared at the start of worship. Land steward, author and activist HeatherAsh Amara in her book *Warrior Goddess Training,* shares this: *"Change is inevitable, but transformation is by conscious choice. While you do not always have control over how or when the changes will occur in your life, you can choose how you are in relation to those changes. When you step towards rather than ignore, fight, or resist change, you reclaim your personal freedom.*

You step onto a path of transformation, and move from being a victim of change to being a co-creator with change." HeatherAsh Amara.

Are you ignoring, fighting or resisting God's invitation to cocreate change in a way that allows you to reclaim your personal freedom? When God calls us to transform, we get to make a choice at that threshold moment. Will we accept the invitation to be humbling and softening in order to create openings and possibilities?

Sometimes our transformations in how we invest our energy are apparent outwardly like with Saul. Sometimes they are inward and attitudinal like with Annanias. Let's not miss the part in which Annanias was sure of Saul's reputation and sure that Saul's life would be limited to his current activity. Annanias was key, probably, in Saul's transformation.

Why are you doing this thing you do? How is it working for you?

May we hold ourselves ever more open to God's invitations through our intuition and our emotional center, ready to say yes cocreating change – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Acts 9:1-20, "Something Sacred is Coming"